

Framing the Nation (Part II), and Colonial Encounters (Part III), followed by an Epilogue. While these sections suggest thematic relationships among the essays, there are certainly larger themes and interrelationships between the essays that are of particular interest to the archival community and make this volume an invaluable contribution to the field. The ranges of ideas explored by the authors are broad – collective memory and memory-making, nation building, cultural incorporation, corporate authorship, colonial and national identity – but not unconnected in highlighting how different kinds of photographs, created for very different purposes and to perform different functions, can be used to understand the various meanings of the geographical imagination.

All of the essayists featured in *Picturing Place* do an excellent job of advocating that photographs be recognized as valid research tools when considered not only for their content as visual images, but for the contexts in which they were conceived, created, disseminated, used, and understood. The authors collectively “acknowledge that photographs were produced and consumed, commissioned and collected in historically specific and carefully crafted ways, and that many factors combined to frame the ways in which meaning was generated. Photographs cannot be studied in isolation from, but rather must be linked in multiple and complex ways to, other forms of material evidence” (p. 7). This underlying understanding of the importance of reading photographs, and indeed any archival record, within their multiple contexts results in a collection of essays that merits the attention of archivists and the archival community. For here, in *Picturing Place*, the authors expertly illustrate the deeper historical understanding of the geographical imagination that becomes possible when photographs are studied as skillfully as these authors do. It makes for an exciting and enjoyable collection of essays that would engage any reader, especially archivists.

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**The Promise of Cultural Institutions.** DAVID CARR. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003. 213 p. ISBN 0-7591-0292-9.

Richard Cox, in a recent book note posted at <<http://hopper.sis.pitt.edu/drcox/Carr.htm>>, has described David Carr's 2003 monograph, *The Promise of Cultural Institutions*, as a “useful addition” to the current scholarly discourse on public and collective memory, recommending it as “an absorbing set of speculations that archivists and other records professionals could use to reconsider their own repositories.” In the book's foreword, we are told that “In our professional literature, ‘how to’ books far outnumber ‘why to’ books. This is a ‘why to’ book. It reminds us why museums and libraries exist and what they have in common” (p. ix). Accordingly, in ten chapters and three appendices,

Carr presents a highly individual and intensely felt disquisition on the role of cultural institutions in American society at the millennium, examining their potential and counselling, in the abstract, how they should best be approached, experienced, analyzed, and benefited from.

His introductory chapter, "A Museum is an Open Work," introduces us to the holistic and interactive capacities displayed by cultural institutions at their best – namely, their ability to challenge us to expand our personal frontiers and to engage in meaningful discourse of our own; or, as Carr phrases it, those which in their excellence, "cause some kind of troubling incompleteness for the user, and so ... inspire human pursuit and gradual change" (p. 5). In another chapter elaborating on the primary role of museums as information providers, Carr suggests that "an institution is educative when it offers the user an array of possibilities to experience, then offers a path to useful examples and interpretations of the evidence, and then encourages the user towards sustained reflection and new planning" (p. 18).

One of the book's more intriguing chapters examines "Libraries and Museums as Incendiary Cultural Institutions" – places where we meet the "indeterminate tensions between continuity and change. These are all tensions of knowledge, discrepancies between what we know and what we do not yet know, the hopes of having enough information to manage a complex life with extraordinary unknowns in it" (p. 38). Another chapter examines the positioning of cultural institutions within the wider modern community – "We need to understand [their] work as *minding* the community" (p. 59, original emphasis) – and includes an echo of our own A.G. Doughty in the observation that "when they are fully given resources and the voices of a responsive, professional and helping staff, cultural institutions compose the purposeful intelligence of their society, holding the culture's memory and minding its continuing community" (p. 56).

Carr is adamant concerning the expectations both brought by and placed upon visitors to this charged environment: "The responsive cultural institution expands the horizons of its users by constructing a situation for critical thinking, a place that offers no satisfying exit except through thought. The responsive setting encourages its users to pause and compare objects, texts, and processes; it makes information available under the control and design of the user; it inspires unplanned opportunities to discuss new images and information; it encourages its users to recognize and consider situations and ideas they have not considered before" (pp. 71-72). The touchstone for this process is the dialogue created by intelligent guidance – the information needs and intellectual curiosity of inquiring visitors, matched and sustained by professional staff displaying a "high tolerance for the unanswered question" (p. 105). "In the public world we inhabit," Carr reminds us, "there is no comparable place – authoritative, venerable, reflective – for a thoughtful person to take a good question and work on it. And there is nowhere else where the

inspiring traces of other questioning human beings are so clearly present" (pp. 94-95).

Carr also has much to say about public trust, in a chapter which addresses the responsibilities accruing to the cultural institution as "an entity that emanates dense waves of power, value, and authority. It is endowed with power ... by its control of knowledge and information. It directs our attention and gives us its objects in galleries, sequences, and patterns over which we have no control. We are given the museum's constructions; we hear its explanation and experience its simulations of context. Our own voices are not particularly important in this relationship – and who is present to listen?" (p. 112) In an extended argument – one of the most stimulating in the book – Carr argues that public trust is an intangible built upon mission statements and codes of professional practice that clearly address and articulate modern-day realities: "When the ethical museum is openly imbedded in an evolving set of public values and promises, it can better demonstrate a way to understand and address the challenging situations of a contemporary life" (p. 114).

Chapters on the responsibility of cultural institutions to meet and nurture the inquisitive minds of children and adults alike, and on the potential of cultural institutions within the post-millennium, post-9/11 world round out the book, which is supplemented by a brief reading list and several appendices. "Notes for Entering and Describing a Cultural Institution" is arguably the most pragmatic section of an otherwise abstract book, while "Each Life: Cultural Institutions and Civic Engagement" neatly distills the substance of Carr's extended and conceptual premises into a mere six pages.

*The Promise of Cultural Institutions* is essentially about museums as instruments of education and change at the level of the individual experience. Although Carr extends his vision to libraries, and sometimes to "historical societies, botanical gardens, archives, zoos [and] parks" (p. 38) – rightly identifying all of them as "information providers" – his primary focus remains the intellectual stimulus and transformative possibilities inherent in objects and exhibitions. Still, there is much in his thinking that can be transposed to the world of archives, particularly his emphasis on the dynamic interface between cultural institutions and their audiences – what archivists would perhaps call, more pragmatically, the researcher service and outreach roles of such agencies.

It takes only a single day of eavesdropping in a typical archives' reading room, for example, to agree with Carr's observation that "the museum and the library are workshops for the unfinished questions of others' lives and our own" (p. 97). Even the most jaded reference archivist, fleeing from a week of genealogists in high summer, would still admit a grudging acknowledgement of Carr's fundamental credo that "When we step into the museum or the library we have willed ourselves to experience the possibilities of change, sometimes great change, driven by our unfinished issues" (p. 94). Step back

far enough from the reading room, and we might even begin to ponder, like Carr, “What can the museum do to provoke a person to cross an edge in thought, to become so deeply engaged that not only the experience, but also the thinking surrounding it becomes part of the watershed moment?” (p. 85)

Many of Carr’s observations are refreshingly sensible in our current age of “information overload,” with its accompanying emphasis on information technology. Take for example, his argument for human intervention and assistance: “The presence of an educative agent – the best model for this person is the reference librarian – helps the user to reframe the problem within the contexts of the collections offered” (p. 87). Again, his beliefs that “entertainment tends to drive content;” that “economics and politics can hold cultural institutions hostage, compromising their independence;” and that “information is widely accessible, but has no boundaries, variable authority, and few opportunities for control” (p. 128) are all salutary reminders that cultural institutions have an even greater responsibility today to design the visitor experience – including online resources – with an eye to intellectual integrity and utility.

Carr’s insistence on the modern responsibilities of both the cultural institution *and* its supporters is also heartening. Mindful of the pressures exerted by political influence, corporate agendas, and academic fashion, Carr views the mandate of the cultural institution as a sacred trust, and argues that in order to thrive, such institutions must go forward with support offered freely and without impediment, through enlightened public or private partnerships: “The restoration of a public, educative culture will require the voices of champions, able to advance learner-centred policies, and articulate aloud the value of exploring an institution and its instrumental power” (p. 88).

If there is anything wrong with *The Promise of Cultural Institutions*, it is the unrelenting emphasis on “why to,” with little or no acknowledgement of the equally important “how to.” Carr’s ideas and arguments cry out for concrete examples. What constitutes a good exhibit? What are some outstanding examples of educative libraries? What are the hallmarks of an “incendiary” institution? What are the best ways to introduce archives, or museums, or art galleries to new and inquiring minds? How are exhibits, or research tools, or library resources constructed and presented, so as to engage visitors in an expanding dialogue rather than a closed transaction? Carr offers no examples, however, other than fleeting references to the obviously superlative – the American Museum of Natural History, the Menil Collection in Houston, the Art Institute of Chicago. This may, of course, be intentional, designed to throw us back on our own resources. The principal result, however, is to annoy and frustrate, because such a provocative train of thought has been left incomplete, the second half of the equation missing. Handbooks such as Rachel Kaplan’s *Little-Known Museums In and Around London* (New York, 1997), or outstanding exhibitions such as *The Uncanny: Experiments in Cyborg Culture*, recently shown at the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon, help fill the void.

These examples capture vividly, in the moment it takes to read a brief paragraph, look at an image, or call up a personal memory, the intensely-felt intellectual response which Carr labours to impart over two hundred pages.

The length of the text and its internal structure in large part defeat the strength of Carr's primary intentions to communicate with his audience. Comprised of reconstituted lectures, conference presentations, and previously published articles, *The Promise of Cultural Institutions* lacks a tight focus, presenting instead a variety of extended ruminations around the chosen theme. As well, the strength and originality of Carr's thinking is almost entirely obscured by jargon. To give but one example: "Cultural institutions are generative cognitive situations where the confluent qualities of objects, concepts, and juxtapositions compose a cognitive problem for their users. In any of these spaces, a person is challenged to construct an experience of meaning: to grasp inherent qualities and latent themes, and to understand their places along an exploratory path" (p. 71). By breaking this extended and convoluted observation down into its constituent parts, we catch a glimpse of what Carr intended, but the impact of his idea – what should have been a revelatory moment for the reader – is completely lost.

This is also quintessentially an American book, one which fairly thrums with the democratic rights of citizens to encounter and claim their own, individual manifest destiny. "Whenever we speak about the library and the museum," Carr reminds us, "and whenever we consider the power of institutions to address and respect the integrity of human intellect and human becoming, the incendiary minds and watchful eyes of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison are in the room." So too, we learn, "are the minds and eyes of our communities and our cultures, those who live and grow strong in our civil societies, families, and schools – all await, contemplating the challenges of their lives, hoping to be addressed and assisted in the course of their own individual human becoming" (p. 37). It is salutary, perhaps even empowering, for archivists to realize that this too is their role in modern society, but in the end, Carr's book is a distant echo – encouraging, stimulating, but less than convincing.

It does not address the immediate issues or concerns of archivists. Nor does it show, in any practical way, how to enhance, expand upon, or convey outwards to the larger community, the wealth we have been entrusted with. And perhaps most significantly, by relegating archives to the lesser spheres somewhere between "botanical gardens" and "zoos," Carr has missed entirely the unique challenge and promise of archival institutions – to safeguard, present, and promote the complex richness of our documentary heritage, the touchstone of human society as we know it, so that those encountering archives are best enabled to interpret them for themselves.

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